

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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P 201348Z JUL 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8867
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
SECDEF WASHDC
DIA WASHDC
USICA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 4143

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, SY, LE
SUBJECT: SYRIA PROMOTES ANTI-PHALANGE/CHAMOUN COALITION

SUMMARY: RECENT DELUGE OF VISITS BY LEBANESE POLITICIANS
(OTHER THAN THE LEBANESE FRONT) LENDS CREDENCE TO REPORTS
THAT SYRIANS INTERESTED IN FORMING ANTI-LEBANESE FRONT
COALITION FROM DIVERSE POLITICAL AND SECTARIAN GROUPS.
SYRIANS ARE NOTICEABLY SENSITIVE TO SUGGESTIONS THAT
THEIR ACTIONS ARE ANTI-CHRISTIAN AND HAVE DEVOTED CONSIDER-
ABLE ATTENTION IN MEDIA TO VISITS AND STATEMENTS OF ANTI-
LF CHRISTIAN PERSONALITIES. UNLIKE PREVIOUS EFFORTS TO
FORM COALITION FROM NON-LF GROUPS, SYRIANS HAVE BEEN CAREFUL NOT
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TO PUBLICIZE THESE EFFORTS, LEST SYRIAN SUPPORT MAKES EFFORT
DIE ABORNING. COALITION SUGGESTED BY INTEL
REPORTS (FRANGIEH/ZGHORTAN CLANS, SYRIAN NATIONAL
PARTY, AND JUMBLATT'S SHOUF-BASED PROGRESSIVE SOCIALIST
PARTY) COULD ENHANCE SYRIA'S CONTENTION THAT ITS ACTIONS
IN LEBANON ENJOY WIDE SUPPORT AND COULD ASSIST IN HOLD-
ING LF SUPPORTERS IN NORTH LEBANON AND THE SHOUF REGION

AT BAY. IN EVENT SYRIA WITHDRAWS FROM THE COUNTRY, SUCH A GROUPING COULD SERVE AS A RALLYING POINT FOR THE SPLINTERED OPPOSITION TO THE LF. NEVERTHELESS, SYRIA'S CHANCES FOR SUCCESSFULLY FORMING AND MAINTAINING SUCH A GROUP LIMITED. THESE DIVERSE GROUPS COULD BE UNITED ONLY BY THEIR FEAR AND DISLIKE OF PHALANGE AND CHAMOUNISTS. PERHAPS, THE CRITICAL FACTOR FOR THE SYRIAN APPROACH IS DETERMINATION BY SUCH GROUPS OF WHOM THEY FEAR MORE--SYRIA OR THE LEBANESE FRONT. IT MAY BE A CLOSE CALL. END SUMMARY.

1. REPORTS THAT SYRIA IS WORKING TO EFFECT AN ANTI-PHALANGE/LIBERAL COLAITION IS LENT CREDENCE BY THE DIVERSE LEBANESE FACTIONS WHICH HAVE CALLED UPON PRESIDENT ASSAD AND FONMIN KHADDAM OVER THE LAST SEVERAL WEEKS. DURING THIS PERIOD A NUMBER OF LEADING LEBANESE POLITICIANS AND PARTY CHIEFS ALONG WITH SOME LESSOR LIGHTS HAVE TROOPED TO DAMASCUS, VISITORS HAVE INCLUDED:
--CHAFIC AL-WAZZA, CHAIRMAN OF THE SUPREME ISLAMIC COUNCIL AND MR. ARIF HAMMOUD THE COUNCIL'S SECRETARY (JULY 7)
--MR MICHEL GHARBI, LEADER OF "THE DEMOCRATIC CHRISTIANS" (JULY 9)
--WALID JUMBLATT, CHAIRMAN OF THE PROGRESSIVE SOCIALIST PARTY AND SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THE PARTY'S POLITBURO (JULY 10)
--KAMAL AL-AS'AD, PRESIDENT OF THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES
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ACCOMPANIED BY DEPUTY HAMID DAKROUB (JULY 11)
--ABDALLAH SAADEH, CHAIRMAN OF THE SYRIAN SOCIALIST NATIONAL PARTY AND SOME LEADERS OF THE PARTY (JULY 12)
--REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ARAB SOCIALIST UNION AND THE POPULAR NASSERITES; SEVERAL MEMBERS OF "THE LEBANESE MOVEMENT" INCLUDING RAFIQ BAL'A AND MUHIEDDIN AGHA; AND HAJ IZZAT HARB OF THE MAQASSID CHARITABLE SOCIETY (JULY 13)
--A DELEGATION OF THE "ISLAMIC GROUPING" INCLUDING FORMER PRIME MINISTERS ABDALLAH YAFI, AND TAKIEIDDIN AL-SULH AS WELL AS DR. NASSIB BARBIR (JULY 14)
--A GROUP OF DEPUTIES FROM THE BIQA VALLEY INCLUDING JOSEPH SKAFF, MICHEL MALOULI, ELIAS HRAWI, SALIM AL-DAWUD, SUBHI BAGHI, HUSSEIN MANSOUR, HASAN ZAHMUL AL-MISS AND SALIM MA'LOUF (JULY 15)
--FUAD LAHOUD, CHAIRMAN OF THE NATIONAL DEFENSE COMMITTEE OF THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES ACCOMPANIED BY DEPUTY TALAH MAR'ABI (JULY 16)
--IMAN MUSA SADR, SHIITE SPIRITUAL LEADER (JULY 18)
--ASEM QANSO AND KAMAL CHATILA, CHAIRMAN OF THE LEBANESE BAATH PARTY (PRO-SYRIAN WING) AND OF THE NASSERITE UNION OF THE WORKING PEOPLE'S FORCES, RESPECTIVELY (THEY MET WITH BAATH PARTY CHAIRMAN ABDALLAH AHMAR ON

JULY 19).

2. SYRIA IS PARTICULARLY SENSITIVE TO CHARGES THAT ITS POLICIES ARE ANTI-CHRISTIAN. STATEMENTS BY THE FRANGIEH CLAN INCLUDING SURVIVING SON ROBERT AND GREEK ORTHODOX PATRIARCH ELIAS IV AND GREEK CATHOLIC PATRIARCH MAXIMOS HAKIM ARE GIVEN PROMINENT COVERAGE. VISITS ALSO SEEMED TO BE WELL-BALANCED CONFESSIONALLY AND RADICAL FACTIONS INCLUDING THE LEBANESE COMMUNISTS ARE NOTABLE BY THEIR ABSCENCE. AMONG PROMINENT POLITICIANS WELL DISPOSED TO SYRIA ONLY RASHID KARAMI HAS NOT FIGURED INTO THIS MOST RECENT ROUND OF VISITS BUT PRESS HAS GIVEN HIS REMARKS FRONT PAGE COVERAGE, MOST RECENTLY ON JULY 18 WHEN KARAMI REPORTEDLY CALLED UPON SARKIS TO IMPLEMENT WHAT HE OUTLINED
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IN HIS MESSAGE TO THE NATION AND ACCUSED THE PHALANGE AND CHAMOUNISTS OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE LATEST ROUND OF FIGHTING.

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3. WHILE NUMEROUS LEBANESE POLITICANS HAVE BEEN VISITING DAMASCUS REGULARLY SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR, THERE IS NO PRECEDENT IN RECENT MEMORY FOR SO MANY PROMINENT LEBANESE POLITICANS COMING HERE IN SUCH A BRIEF TIME SPAN. THIS FAR THE PRESS HAS REFRAINED FROM EDITORIALIZING ON THE NEED TO WELD TOGETHER SUCH DIVERSE LEBANESE FORCES TO PREVENT PARTITION OTHER THAN IN THE MOST GENERAL TERMS, (THIS CONTRASTS WITH PRESS REPORTING DURING A PERIOD IN 1977 WHEN SYRIA WAS PROMOTING A UNION BETWEEN THE LEBANESE BAATH, SHATILA'S PATRIOTIC FRONT AND WALID JUMBLATT'S PSP AS A COUNTER-WEIGHT TO THE LEBANESE FRONT AND AS A SUITABLE PARTNER FOR THE FRONT IN ANY RECONCILIATION TALKS.) INSTEAD, THE
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SYRIAN PRESS HAS BEEN DOMINATED DAILY SINCE THE RECENT CLASHES IN BEIRUT BY EXPRESSIONS OF SUPPORT FROM VARIOUS LEBANESE QUARTERS FOR SYRIA'S POLICY AND THEIR DENUNCIATIONS OF THE POLICIES AND LEADERSHIP OF THE PHALANGE AND LIBERALS.

4. NOW THAT FRANGIEH IS SPLIT OFF FROM THE LEBANESE FRONT, SYRIANS APPEAR TO HAVE SHELVED THEIR FORMER INTEREST IN CREATING A MODERATE GROUPING OF PREDOMINANTLY MUSLIM/ ARAB NATIONALIST PARTIES IN FAVOR OF A BROAD COLAITION OF ANTI-LEBANESE FRONT CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM FACTIONS. THE ABSENCE OF ANY HIGH LEVEL PUBLIC CALLS FOR FORMATION OF SUCH A GROUPING AND THE FAILURE TO MOUNT A SUSTAINED PROPAGANDA DRIVE HERE IN FAVOR OF IT MAY INDICATE THAT SYRIANS ARE MORE ATTUNED THAN IN THE PAST TO LEBANESE SENSITIVITIES AND LESS INSISTENT THAT ANY SUCH GROUPING BE SPEARHEADED BY PRO-SYRIAN TOADIES SUCH AS QANSO AND SHATILA.

5. ACCORDING TO SEVERAL INTEL REPORTS, SYRIA WOULD SEEM TO ENVISION THE FRANGIEH'S AND THE CONFESSIONALLY-MIXED BUT CHRISTIAN-LED SYRIAN NATIONLIST PARTY WHICH ARE STRONG IN THE NORTH OF THE COUNTRY LINKING UP WITH JUMBLATT'S SHOUF-BASED PSP IN CENTRAL LEBANON. PRESUMABLY, THEY WOULD SERVE AS A COUNTER-BALANCE TO THE PHALANGE AND THE LIBERALS. WHILE THESE GROUPS MIGHT LACK THE WHEREWITHALL ON THEIR OWN TO CONFRONT EFFECTIVELY THE LEBANESE FRONT, SYRIAN AND PALESTINIAN SUPPORT COULD MAKE THE DIFFERENCE.

6. SUCH A COALITION COULD SERVE SEVERAL PURPOSES.

POLITICALLY, IT WOULD DEMONSTRATE THAT THE LEBANESE DIFFERENCES ARE NOT EXCLUSIVELY, OR EVEN PRINCIPALLY, SECTARIAN IN NATURE. IT WOULD BOLSTER SYRIA'S CLAIM
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THAT THEIR ACTIONS AGAINST LF ENJOY SUPPORT FROM MANY QUARTERS IN LEBANON. MILITARILY, THE SYRIANS WOULD NOT WELCOME ANY RENEWAL OF THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR, BUT THEY COULD LOOK TO SUCH GROUPS TO POSE A SUFFICIENTLY CREDIBLE THREAT TO PREVENT ANY LEBANESE FRONT UPRISING IN THE SHOUF AND NORTH LEBANON. FINALLY, SYRIA COULD CONCEIVABLY ARM AND TRAIN SUCH A GROUPING SUFFICIENTLY TO HOLD THEIR OWN IF SYRIA WERE FORCED TO WITHDRAW FROM LEBANON.

7. IF THIS IS SYRIA'S PLAN, AS REPORTS INDICATE ITS CHANCES FOR SUCCESS WOULD APPEAR TO BE LIMITED. THE GROUPS WHICH ARE BEING TOUTED FOR THIS COALITION ARE UNITED BY LITTLE OTHER THAN THEIR DISLIKE FOR THE PHALANGE AND TO A LESSER EXTENT, CHAMOUN. FRANGIEH AND OTHER TRADITIONAL NORTHERN POLITICIANS WOULD BE IN IT ONLY FOR REVENGE AND TO PRESERVE THEIR FIEFDOMS IN THE NORTH. THE SYRIAN NATIONALISTS STILL CLING TO THEIR DREAM OF A GREATER SYRIA AND ALSO WISH TO REVENGE THEIR LOSSES TO THE PHALANGE DURING THE CIVIL WAR, WHILE WALID JUMBLATT WANTS TO PREVENT PARTITION AND PRESERVE THE SHOUF FOR HIS DRUZE SUPPORTERS. PRESUMABLY OTHERS COULD BE INTERESTED IN JOINING SUCH A GROUPING INCLUDING THE INDEPENDENT NASSERISTS (MURABITUN) AND THE PRO-SYRIAN BAATH AND POPULAR FORCES OF SHATILA, BUT ANY SUCH GROUPING WOULD BE INHERENTLY UNSTABLE AND LACK THE RELATIVE COHESION OF ITS RIVALS. NEVERTHELSS, GIVEN THE CRITICISM IT ENCOUNTERED DURING ITS SHELLING OF BEIRUT, SYRIA CAN BE EXPECTED TO PRESS ON WITH EFFORTS TO FORGE A COALITION WHICH WOULD GIVE SYRIA'S ACTIONS GREATER LEGITIMACY AND BLUNT CHARGES THAT ITS ACTIONS WERE MOTIVATED IN ANY WAY BY SECTARIAN CONSIDERATIONS. A CRITICAL FACTOR IN THE SUCCESS OF THE SYRIAN APPROACH WOULD BE A DETERMINATION BY THESE DIVERSE LEBANESE GROUPS OF WHOM THEY NEED FEAR MORE--THE LEBANESE FRONT OR THE SYRIAN BAATHISTS.
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